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Some objections to Peels' combinatorial analysis of belief.

For a symposium on Rik Peels' *Responsible Belief: A theory in Ethics and Epistemology* at *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*

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There is a myriad of things to like about Rik Peels' book *Responsible Belief: A theory in Ethics and Epistemology*, but for me its stand out feature is the clarity, thoroughness, and care that the writing always displays. Peels' prose never contains a word out of place, and embodies a palpable kind of intellectual conscientiousness, itself an implicitly impressive model and standard for the sort of intellectual ethics that Peels explicitly begins to articulate in this book. The book tackles a large number of fascinating issues more or less centred on the sub-field which has come to be known as 'the Ethics of Belief'. I would like to focus, in this short piece, on Peel's treatment of one of the most foundational issues of that sub-field – the issue of what belief is.

Peels tells us that among the reasons for why we ought to investigate that issue is that, as he hopes to show, "a plausible analysis of belief also sheds light on suspension of judgement" (Peels 2016, p. 30). And, he thinks, correctly in my view, that a good account of our ethics of belief should be concerned with suspension of judgement *qua* doxastic attitude, since we can not only be blamed for our beliefs and disbeliefs, but also for our errant suspensions of judgement. As he puts it, "sometimes, we think that someone is blameworthy for suspending judgement, for instance, because she has not informed herself as while she should have done" (Peels 2016, p. 30). Importantly, however, and this is a point that Peels does not raise, it is not sufficient for phi-ing to be an indispensable subject matter for the ethics of *belief* that we can be blameworthy for phi-ing. Ethics simpliciter is about all things blameworthy (*inter alia*), the ethics of *belief* is about our blameworthy *doxastic* attitudes. The reason then that the Ethics of Belief ought to account for suspension of judgement is that the latter is a *doxastic* attitude. My overall concern, as we shall see, is that I do not think that under Peel's analysis can we explain why suspension of judgment belongs to the same genus as belief.

I agree with Peels as regards the idea that we need an alternative to the two major accounts of the metaphysics of belief, what we can broadly call an 'occurentist' account and a 'dispositionalist' account. Roughly, according to an occurentist account to believe a proposition is to have some sort of representation of the world somehow 'occur' in one's mind – Peels uses the

locution 'thinks that p'.¹ According to dispositionalist accounts to believe a proposition is to bear certain dispositional properties, usually to do with certain relevant actions. Both accounts are known to face real difficulties: it is hard to see how under the 'occurentist' account we can make sense of the idea that we can sensibly say of someone who is sleeping at t, that they believe that Paris is the Capital of France at t (so while they are not at t 'thinking' that Paris is the Capital of France). And it is hard to see how under the 'dispositionalist' account we can make sense of the idea that we do not have an infinite number of beliefs at any one time – since there are an infinite number of things that someone *would* assent to if asked: e.g. that 12 is greater than 11, that 13 is greater than 12, that 14 is greater than 13... and so on and so forth.

There is a third alternative account of what belief is that Peels does not discuss – an account sometimes known as a 'pragmatist' or 'neo-Wittensteinian' view. According to this view, roughly, S believes that p just in case the assigning of a belief that p is the best explanation of S's actions and dispositions to action (both 'internal' and 'external'). Importantly, the account seems to evade the issues above (*prima facie*, at least). This is because assigning an infinite number of beliefs to someone would surely always be surplus to requirements in an explanation of anyone's set of actions, and the account allows you to claim that you believe that p at t while you are sleeping at t. So this does look to me – at least at first blush – like an alternative worth considering. However, it does face issues; for instance, it seems to imply that we can believe at will, where most people writing on the issue seem to think that we cannot (cf. Hedden 2015). I think these issues can be addressed in a refined, and modified account. but I am not going to discuss how here, since my aim is merely to point out that there is a viable theory of the metaphysics of belief that Peels does not address.

I mention this third alternative not merely to score a cheap point, but because Peels' account of doxastic metaphysics seems to trade on there being a stalemate in the current dialectic on the metaphysics of belief where a choice has to be made between occurentism and dispositionalism, and where each way of making the choice comes at considerable theoretical cost. Peels' suggested way out of this impasse is to present an account where one does not have to make the relevant choice. He does this by resisting the assumption that 'belief' is a univocal term, or, thought of differently, that there really is only one primary *species* of belief, such that we will need only one theory to fully describe its metaphysics. Peels proposes that 'belief' is polysemous, and that there are different species of belief – what he calls: occurent belief, tacit belief, and dispositional belief. The trick is to use the very

¹ Though one may legitimately complain that an account according to which one believes that p iff one 'thinks that p' is not very informative, since someone who wants to know what it is to believe that p, I conjecture, is likely also to want to know what 'thinks that p' involves.

motivations that underscore any given univocal theory of the metaphysics of belief x to instead motivate the thought that there is a doxastic feature y motivating x such that bearers of y constitute a discrete species within the genus 'belief'. As such we do not have to make a choice between occurrent and dispositional theories of belief – we just have to accept instead that there are different species of belief, each germane to a different analysis.

So, we get Peels' respective analyses of the three species of belief:

OB: S occurrently believes that p at some time t iff S at t considers p and thinks at t that p . (Peels 2017, p. 31).

DB'' S dormantly believes that p at t iff (i) S at t does not consider whether p , (ii) the last time t^* at which S considered whether p , S thought that p , and (iii) at any time from t^* and t , if S were to consider whether p , S would normally think that p . (Peels 2017, p. 37).

TB'' S tacitly believes that p at t iff (i) S at t does not occurrently or dormantly believe that p , (ii) from S 's perspective, p obviously follows from propositions that S occurrently or dormantly believes at t , and (iii) if S at t were to consider whether p , S would normally think that p . (Peels 2017, p. 37).

Peels calls his overall account a "Combination Account" of belief because it spells out "dormant and tacit belief in terms of *both* obvious entailment *and* certain dispositions" (Peels 2017 p. 37). The account is made particularly plausible, it seems to me, due to Peels' making a distinction between dormant and tacit belief – since there is more to non-occurrent belief than being mere dispositional belief. That is, non-occurrent belief comes in the tacit and dormant varieties. This means that Peels' account looks to be more than a mere variant of a position Eric Schwitzgebel has called 'liberal dispositionalism' (e.g. Schwitzgebel 2002), according to which 'silently uttering to oneself that p ' at relevant time counts among the possible actions relevant to the ascription of belief that p (and so the position is compatible with the failure of behaviourism, hence 'liberal').

He does not seem to mention it, but in his "Combination Account" Peels also analyses dormant and tacit belief in part in terms of occurrent belief, but, crucially, occurrent belief is not spelled out in terms of either dispositions or obvious entailments. But though dormant, tacit, and occurrent belief are meant to be different species, they are nonetheless supposed to belong to the same *genus*. In order for the analysis to be a *combination* analysis, and not merely a list of different analyses, it is important that occurrent beliefs, tacit beliefs and dispositional beliefs are *beliefs* – or, at least, doxastic attitudes more broadly (which encompass suspensions of judgement too).

Peels does not however tell us what he thinks it is that makes each of dormant, tacit, and occurrent beliefs *doxastic* (belonging to the genus belief). Since the analysis of occurrent belief features in the definition of all three, it seems natural to surmise that under Peel's combination account something cannot be a properly doxastic without involving occurrent belief (construed as 'thinking that p ') at least counterfactually. In other words what seems to make something doxastic is the following:

Meta-Combination: A mental state α is a belief iff "thinking that p " is involved either materially or counterfactually in the analysis of α .

According to what I am calling Meta-Combination, one cannot have either an occurrent, or dormant, or tacit belief if – under specified conditions – one does not think that p .

But now take Peels' analysis of suspension of judgement:

The Combination Account that I have defended also provides us with the material to construe a plausible account of suspension of judgement. For we can now say that one suspends judgement on p if, roughly, one has considered p or p obviously follows from propositions that one has considered, and one neither believes nor disbelieves that p . (Peels 2016, p. 42).

What is it that makes suspension of judgement doxastic? Given Peels' tacit acceptance of Meta-Combination, we might expect that he holds that when suspension of judgement is a doxastic attitude because when one suspends that p , one thinks that p under certain circumstances specified by Peels' account of suspension of judgement. But do we find any such conditions in Peel's definition above? No, we do not. In fact, that we cannot find such conditions seems a consequence of the account making it the case that "belief and suspension are mutually exclusive" (Peels 2016, p. 42).

But this seems to pull the rug from under Peels as regards his account of what makes the Combination Account attractive from the perspective of someone *who is solely interested in the Ethics of Belief*. And, further, since suspension no longer looks like a doxastic attitude, it makes it look inexplicable how suspension of judgement can replace belief, as per the natural locution: "I used to believe Peel's Combination account of belief, but having thought about it some more, I now suspend judgement on whether it is true."

And, relatedly, I think this makes trouble for Peels' answer to the following objection, raised by Peels himself:

...one may object that TB'' suffers from an embarrassment of riches, since it would follow that we have an infinite number of beliefs. This, once might think, conflicts with materialism: if we are material beings, then, given that we consist of a finite number of material entities, we cannot have an infinite number of beliefs. (Peels 2016, p. 41).

Peels responds briefly by first noting that dispositionalist accounts of belief face the same issue. And then with the following:

Moreover the idea that we have an infinite number of beliefs conflicts with materialism only if we make several further controversial assumptions. Embracing both materialism and, for instance, functionalism – on which beliefs are certain functions (causal relations of the brain – is perfectly compatible with the claim that we have an infinite number of beliefs. (Peels 2016, p. 42).

The problem with Peels' response is that, first, the objection does not depend on the truth of materialism (as Peels himself notes, one could be a materialist and a functionalist, and so hold that we have an infinite number of beliefs). The "cognitive spread" objection (as it is sometimes known) is better thought of, I think, in terms of the idea that we are finite beings, and that as such we cannot be under an infinite number of obligations, if some version of 'ought' implies 'can' is the case. If we had infinite beliefs then we would be subject to an infinite number of obligations – assuming the truth of idea that Peels seeks to defend: that we do have an ethics of belief. And note that we might even be immortal beings who are nonetheless finite, in the sense that we can only ever occupy limited space, and limited time.

Second, it surely cannot be a point in favour of Peels' combination account that dispositional (and other) theories of belief are vulnerable to the same objection, given that the account was meant to *get us out* of the situation where all the current theories of belief face insuperable problems.

I think the last pair of objections are related to the previous one because they have to do with how we might expect the different parts of a combination account to work together to be better than the mere sum of their parts. In short, Peels' combination account looks attractive because it promises to bring together the best aspects of the seemingly divergent theories of belief. It does so by disaggregating the sorts of things that motivate these theories such that they become relevant to separate species of belief. But in so doing, the account needs to tell us how these different species (including suspension of judgment) belong to the same genus. And, further, the different accounts – in combination – need to work together in the combination account to make the theory invulnerable to what the different accounts are individually vulnerable

to. I have here aimed to show that Peels' combination account struggles to meet these last two desiderata.

Peels could respond with the rejoinder that he calls his account a 'combination account' *only* because he analyses tacit and dormant belief in terms of both obvious entailments and dispositional properties. But the account has a *combinatorial* air, in that Peels *also* analyses tacit and dormant belief in terms of dispositions to 'think that p', viz. to have occurrent belief (as per his analysis of the latter). And his 'combination account' is premised on the idea that there are different varieties of belief, each germane to a different analysis. My suspicion is that the more reason we have for thinking that this last idea is true, the more difficult it will be to give a unified account of what it is that makes doxastic attitudes doxastic, and so it will be difficult for us to talk meaningfully about an independent ethics of belief.

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